

Fact and Fiction in Film

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with an introduction by Aviam Soifer

Introduction

The great historian Carl Becker was one of many historians quite skeptical about the hard reality of historical facts. Becker stated, for example, "It is the persisting historical fact, rather than the ephemeral actual event, which makes a difference to us now; and the historical fact makes a difference only because it is, and so far as it is, in human minds."¹ But Becker said this in the 1920s, before the immeasurable influence of film and television images became obvious and before the ability of film to capture history seemed to dissolve the distinction Becker drew.

Today, the relative credibility of film images pervades our cultural milieus. Advertisers literally bank on the power of film images. Referees are overruled by the instant replay of television pictures in crucial football games. Even if belatedly, in legal circles today videotaped depositions and video portraits of the lives of accident victims often constitute the most powerful evidence a jury or judge may consider. Yet both popular culture and legal culture remain remarkably naive about fact and fiction on film.

In particular, historic film images are seldom scrutinized with any real care. Becker emphasized that we cannot turn around somehow to walk back into the uneven country of history we have just traversed in order to find "hard facts" or "cold facts" or anything substantial to pile up or bump into that is akin to physical material. If Becker is even partially correct in arguing that history is what is in our minds today, we probably should pay attention to how our historical images got there. Images from both documentaries and fictional films surely play a dominant role in our reconstructions of the past. Yet for most of us, it remains vitally important to cling to a distinction between the reality of a documentary film and the fictional feature that we understand at least on some level sets out to manipulate our emotions.

Some of our most powerful contemporary literary works blend fact and fiction quite self-consciously. As novelist Tim O'Brien put it in his latest treatment of the Vietnam war, "Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story."² Recent presidential campaigns underscore the potency of visual images. (And, to many, both the general voter apathy and the election results suggest that the

American electorate will not be troubled with facts when bombarded with red, white and blue pictures and carefully programmed newsbites promising Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" and the like). Nevertheless, popular perception of the films we pay to watch, and the documentaries we generally do not watch but sometimes say we did, still seems committed to a dichotomous view, distinguishing fiction from fact, feature from documentary film. The United States Supreme Court may have recently rejected "the creation of an artificial dichotomy between 'opinion' and fact,"³ yet fact and other-than-fact still seem generally to be entirely separate spheres.

On closer examination, it is surprisingly hard to distinguish truth from fiction in the world of both fiction and documentary films. Documentaries about real life occurrences sometimes contain re-enacted material. Often, as in the case of Ken Burns' *The Civil War*, when the real participants are not available to tell their own stories, quotes from the period are read and music is used to create and influence the viewer's reactions. Academic "experts" contribute their interpretations, thus adding another layer of blur between what is fact and what is not.

In feature films, even in films that seemingly make no pretense to cover real events (though many fictional films are based on real life stories), the line between fact and fiction is also frequently ambiguous. Facts are used to add immediacy and significance to a story. (Ironically, a fiction film based on a true life situation has additional marketing possibilities as does a documentary with historical re-enactment, each striving for what trade journals call "crossover" audiences.) When the concerns of storytelling and marketing get cross-connected, the results defy easy classification.

By considering the examples of two films — one, a documentary, *Roger and Me* and the other, a feature film, *Matewan* — we look at the intent of the filmmakers in blurring the line between fact and fiction. We also consider what this suggests about popular understanding of the terms "fact" and "fiction," an understanding partly formed from art.

A Documentary Filmmaker's View *Roger and Me: Documentary As Comedy?*

When I went to our local video store to rent Michael Moore's documentary, *Roger and Me*, I had only ten minutes to spare. Figuring the film would be catalogued under *Documentary*, I looked for it in that strikingly small section. No *Roger and Me*. Maybe, I thought, since the film played theatrically, it was now labeled as "Feature." No such luck. All right, I thought, cult classic. As one of the movies most written about in 1989-1990, *Roger and Me* probably had earned a place in that category. But no, cult films were some-

thing else altogether. Deciding to give up and to devote an evening finally to watching the rest of *The Civil War*, I began to leave the store. Just inside the door, I saw "Comedy." "Comedy?" Why not? There, lo and behold, was *Roger and Me*.

"Comedy"? For a documentary? As a documentary filmmaker and producer of both independent and PBS films, I was taken aback. True, none of my films (to date) is especially funny, but doesn't listing a documentary as comedy undermine some of its claim to truth? I'd grown up believing — indeed, I even continued to believe as a grown-up — that what went into documentaries was supposed to be true to life. While true to life often means funny, doesn't the label "comedy" somehow challenge the truthful part of the documentary? Did moving a film document of real life into the comedy category challenge its apparent truthfulness? Were fact and fiction merging here?

For those who missed last year's hotly debated "comedy," let me summarize. Michael Moore — journalist, documentarian or comedian, depending on your point of view — is the son of a former General Motors employee who decides to take on GM in the wake of plant closings and rising unemployment. While he tries to meet face-to-face with Roger Smith, chairman of GM's board, to advocate on behalf of unemployed workers, Moore takes us on a merry ride through his hometown, Flint, Michigan. Here we meet many of the unemployed and see scenes of enormous disparity between Flint's rich and poor as well as between Flint's poor and almost-poor. Meanwhile, we are treated to bizarre, ironic looks at what makes Flint (read: America) tick: the annual parades, the celebrities who march through Flint promoting its values and goodness (despite the fact that its economy obviously seems to be falling apart), President Reagan taking unemployed workers out for pizza and urging them to relocate to the Sun Belt, and even Flint's homegrown talent, the host of the Newlyweds Game. (When he's not strutting his Hollywood stuff for the hometown folks, Ben Barker "privately" treats us to an array of sexist and anti-Semitic jokes). In the end, Moore manages to meet Roger Smith at a company Christmas bash. Smith, on his way out of the ballroom where he has just given an inspirational message to GM's remaining employees, is in no mood to banter with critics. Giving little more than a canned answer to Moore's questions, Smith brushes him aside and continues on his way. No bleeding heart will stop him.

The question is, in the midst of what could reasonably be described as "documentary," what is it about Moore's film that makes it a "comedy?" Not unlike other documentary filmmakers, Moore organizes his material in a way that heightens the irony of the scenes we see. For instance, Moore probably didn't film wealthy women playing golf at their country club and then im-

mediately thereafter film evicted tenants carrying their belongings curbside, though he places the scenes side-by-side and even intercuts between them. Apparently, the costly and ultimately disastrous efforts to attract tourists to Flint, meant to buoy Flint's ailing economy, took place before the plant closings, though the film makes them seem wrong-headed attempts to limit the impact of the closings.

All documentarians try to put films together in a way that helps tell a story. If material filmed at a later time more appropriately sets up the story earlier, they are likely to use that material early in the film. Both scenes took place; only their relation in time is manipulated. So, though the irony in *Roger and Me* is heavy-handed and surely influenced by Moore's direction, it is neither irony nor playing with time that classes his film as comedy.

What then about the role of Moore himself? Moore's voice as a filmmaker, the narrator-cum-star, the crusading (albeit hilarious) journalist who takes on the case of the little guy in fighting the big guy, is that of the American anti-hero who here sounds like Garrison Keillor and works in the tradition of Mark Twain. Moore is deadpan and opinionated, but also even-tempered (this is no anxiety-ridden Woody Allen urbanite). What we see is a moderate midwesterner (a type I recognize from my childhood in Iowa). Moore strings simple sentences together and offers us his offbeat look at people and places. He is not always kind. Though it initially seems sympathetic, Moore's handling of a woman who gets by selling rabbits "for pets or meat" becomes tasteless and voyeuristic. His framing of the predicament of a "colors" lady is hardly more understanding. Unlike many documentary filmmakers these days who let people in their films speak for themselves, Moore shows us the world according to his lights. He tells us how we ought to see people. As we watch, reflecting on some of the discomfort we feel under his unsubtle spell, we realize how manipulated we have been.

It is this issue of point-of-view that frames the language and the approach of filmmakers, whether feature or documentary directors. In selecting shots, directors constantly keep in mind from whose point-of-view the story is being told (or whose angle of vision, another, more cinematic term for the same thing). If we see something from a character's point-of-view, we look out to see what she sees. If we see something from an omniscient point-of-view, we look at the character herself. (Omniscient quite often means the director's or the off-camera narrator's point of view). In Moore's film, we see people and events as Moore sees them. There's nothing wrong with this approach. In Moore's hands, and point-of-view also implies judgment and advocacy. While the advocacy position is scarcely new to filmmaking, Moore's universe is criticized as he describes it. Herein lies the crux for both Moore's critics and those who would deem him comedic.

Michael Moore is funny, particularly when the object of his laughter is something we find foolish too. Take civic improvements. Take the parades. Take Pat Boone and Ronald Reagan (to paraphrase, Henny Youngman, "Please!"). We laugh at these things and people all the time. When Moore calls our attention to this fact, we recognize his laughter as ours. But when he underscores the irony of the "Rabbit Lady's" plans to become an assistant veterinarian or when he describes the "Color Lady's" description of a disaster — that her own colors had been done wrong all along — we feel used. Part of our discomfort arises from issues of both class and sensitivity. The Rabbit Lady and the Color Lady are doing the best they can. Their "false consciousness" should not be something to rub their noses in. On the other hand, Pat Boone, Ronald Reagan and the civic improvements, which seem to represent false consciousness writ large, are really part of the problem. And (if I understand *New York Times v. Sullivan* correctly) as public figures and as issues of public concern, they are fair game for criticism, even ridicule. Moore betrays no trust between himself and these figures by the way he handles them in the film. With the Rabbit and Color Ladies, quite the opposite is true.

On the other hand, many of the things Moore pokes fun at are American icons worth ridiculing. Moore has a wonderful eye and ear for the symbols that are died-in-the-wool American — parades, movie stars, Miss Michigan. He is also a master at hearing American clichés and idioms. The very poignant scenes with the Eviction Man — "it's a lousy job, but somebody's got to do it" — and the uproarious encounters with Flint's GM lobbyist (who spouts corporate pablum, including shock and disbelief that GM's responsibility would be to its workers and not to making a profit) are telling examples. Moore has a good eye for finding enemies. His enemies seem to be ours, too, and he becomes our advocate when he goes after them.

Yet we wonder: Just who is Michael Moore to take the stand he does? One of the things Moore does brilliantly is to establish with admirable brevity his legitimacy to be the spokesperson for unemployed auto workers. As the son of someone who worked for 35 years for GM and as someone who not only knows of, but is still bitter about, the context of the famous Flint sitdown strike of 1937, Moore can claim to be entitled to take his anger out on GM on behalf of the workers. His brash, confrontational tactics in trying to stake out Roger Smith are a small measure of what GM has done to the workers themselves.

Moore's documentary style and the assumptions he makes about point-of-view put him squarely in the "new journalism" school of documentary filmmaking. What distinguishes Moore from other practitioners of this sub-genre is his distance. Moore places himself in his film as commentator and not as a character. Though we hear details from Michael Moore's life, he is never

presented on camera as vulnerable. Even when he is about to be thrown out of Roger Smith's eating club or is not allowed entrance to a shutdown plant on its final day of operation, Moore is clearly in control. It is his own editorial distance, rather than any fluke of filming or editing, that seems almost to "violate" an unwritten filmmaker's canon. Imagining oneself to be a subject of one's own film, and thereby sympathizing, is not Moore's strength. Documentarian as trasher seems closer to the truth.

Matewan: Empathy in Epic Fiction

Fiction film at its best often shows enormous respect for its characters. Putting oneself in the position of each character can be the strength of a feature director, creating a film that "reads" as truth. John Sayles' feature, *Matewan* (1987) is as much social criticism as *Roger and Me*. On one level, *Matewan* is the simple story of a union strike, but Sayles winds up revealing much of what is ugly in the underside of the American character. In his tale of good guys and bad guys, Sayles' action distills to the level of classic American myth without the traditional happy ending. The union organizer rides into town and becomes father figure to an idealistic boy. He preaches non-violence and gets gunned down. The bad guys, the mine owners, care only for profits, and they win. The people in the mining town of Matewan — poor whites, the blacks brought in as strike breakers, the immigrant Italian workers — forge unity through strength and are left worse than they were, their numbers depleted through violence.

Matewan is a powerful story with a tight script and a precise directorial hand. From the opening shot, Sayles draws remarkable narrative power from the visuals, aided by the eloquent cinematography of Haskell Wexler. In this work, Sayles has found the perfect story for displaying his skills as director and writer. Each of his characters is cast as though in a morality play. Among them: the attractive young widow and temptress who sits at the train station welcoming newcomers to town; the sheriff/town protector who comes back from World War I with a knowledge of killing and a will to use that knowledge; the Christ-like union organizer who comes to town to fight the inhumane powers-that-be with a union, rather than with violence; and the miners, one black and one Italian, who lead the violent revolt.

In Sayles' movie, Joe Kenehan, the outsider, comes to town to organize a miners' union. A pacifist and a Wobbly, Joe believes unions and not violence are the way to go. In a town where violent feuding is a way of life — *Matewan* is near the scene of the Hatfield and McCoy feuds; one of the characters in both the historical story of *Matewan* and in Sayles' film is Sid Hatfield —

Kenehan's mission is tough. Though he is able to convince the miners for a while that "a new day is dawning," violence triumphs in the end.

Sayles takes the outlines of his story from a real, bloody miners' strike in 1920 in Matewan, West Virginia. Some of the characters in his movie are drawn, partly, from those historical events: Sid Hatfield, the sheriff; Cabell Testerman, the mayor; a black miner called Few Clothes, who was rumored to have been a veteran of the Spanish-American War (played in the film by James Earl Jones); and a company spy named C. E. Lively. In his book, *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie Matewan* (1987), Sayles makes clear what drew him to this story:

All the elements and principles involved seemed basic to the idea of what America has become and what it should be. Individualism versus collectivism, the personal and political legacy of racism, the immigrant dream and the reality that greeted it, monopoly capitalism at its most extreme versus American populism at its most violent, plus a lawman with two guns strapped on walking to the center of town to face a bunch of armed enforcers — what more could you ask for in a story?⁴

Breaking Boundaries and the Rules of the Game

Sayles' story — a fictionalized account of an actual union strike and the killings that ended it — is deadly serious. You leave the theater reflecting upon the injustices and the possibilities of the American system. It makes you feel, however briefly, moved to redress the imbalance of race and class in a capitalist system.

By contrast, Michael Moore's documentary leaves viewers laughing and shaking their heads over the ironies of class disparity in America. Moore has legitimate direct connections to the story he tells and the people in it, perhaps a factor in his ability to capture and to manipulate their stories. Sayles, who grew up as the son of educators in the northeast and graduated from Williams College, comes to his West Virginia story as an outsider outraged by what he discovers. He uses film and the power of his storytelling to awaken interest in class issues, violence and capitalism. Moore, who grew up under the shadow of GM, takes the abuses of disparity as a given. Having become accustomed to the America he is a part of, he brings to his story a comedian's irony and understatement. Though he draws us into his point-of-view with newsreels, personalities, and institutions familiar to most viewers, he neither takes up arms nor challenges us to do so. Sayles mission and method are vastly different. So is his storytelling and so is the powerful reaction his film generates.

These two films focus troublesome issues about truth. Sayles admits that not enough details were known about the story of the real strike and its

participants to flesh out a screenplay. He fuses real and fictionalized characters in the interest of creating a dramatic film:

Since the historical figures I was dealing with were not widely known, I felt a responsibility to stick pretty close to the verifiable accounts of their actions and shied away from their personal lives. The burden of personalizing the story then fell on the fictional characters.⁵

In *Roger and Me*, Moore's characters similarly are little known. We come to know Roger Smith only through his position at GM and the places he frequents — the health club, the eating club, the GM office building where no one is allowed onto the 14th floor without written permission — all suggesting a man shielded by the trappings of power. We never see or hear Roger except in his corporate mould. Moore uses this ploy so that Smith himself is as much player, unwittingly, as filmmaker Moore. The others we meet — the Eviction Man, the post office employees, the Color and Rabbit Ladies — are all seen at work. The only people we see not defined by work are the women playing golf and the tenants being evicted. In the first case, these women choose to be at leisure, in the other, people are being forcibly moved. Setting is so vital to Moore's world that the only person we get to know with any dimensionality is Moore himself. We identify with him because he gives us a chance to. The other people are little more than mock-ups, characterizing the world as Moore sees it. Moore's world is a chess game in which he is the only player. On the other hand, as the autoworkers' advocate, he is doing to the world what our world does to them. He is the role model, gaining power through film.

Moore invites us to see the world as he sees it and he blatantly manipulates us — by what he chooses to film and the way he edits. Sayles does the same, carefully crafting his story so that we are drawn along as he wants us to be. We are consciously manipulated to an equal extent by both filmmakers, yet in the case of one (Moore), we feel and witness the manipulation. In the case of the other (Sayles), we are little aware of just how much we are being drawn in. Because Sayles' method is subtle, we don't notice his intrusion into how we view people and events in his work. Because Moore is so "out front," we feel strongly and react to his manipulation (either for or against it).

This, then, is our somewhat paradoxical reaction to witnessing the unfolding of a true versus fictionalized drama. We willingly suspend disbelief to enter into the world of *Matewan* and to sympathize with its characters, most of whom are fictional. We join the film's director in so doing. Moore encourages us to enter into a world which he and we know and can see is real. It is because it is real that we bring to it our own "real" reactions. Sometimes we agree with Moore's point of view; other times, we almost certainly do not. We don't leave judgment at the theater door. If we take issue with Moore, and not with Sayles, it is because our standards of judgment for a documentary are

different from what they are for a fictionalized film precisely because the documentary purports to be a real and not a fictionalized document. Further, none of Moore's characters reaches the level of arch villain that Sayles' do. Roger Smith may be a bad guy, and Moore gives us ample evidence in his commentary to support that claim. But as we see Roger Smith, he hardly seems villainous. Moore faces a great dilemma in trying to portray bureaucratic wrongdoing. Everyone at GM may have good corporate reasons for decisions made and actions taken, but the conglomerated result may be awful. It is a tremendous challenge for a filmmaker to try to capture bad things done by an artificial body such as a corporation or a government. If there is no smoking gun, there may be no film image at all.

We have to accept on faith Moore's claim that Smith is a villain. He does not let us experience in a film sense the building of a story that lets us feel Smith's villainy. Not so with *Matewan*. In scene after scene, we see the nastiness of the Baldwin agents. Indeed, they are at times almost stock villains. When the miners go after them with guns, we share some primal need for vengeance.

Here, then, are some complicated limits to the portrayal of truth on film. We like our villains to behave appropriately. (Why else do we hate Richard Nixon so much more than Ronald Reagan when Reagan's policies toward the poor were more devastating?) Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and many lesser known villains project nasty exteriors. They say things that make us feel a measure of what their victims feel. With Roger Smith, we are given no such encounter. We see him only in sheltered settings where his studied corporate image is on display. Though we see in Moore's film the devastating effects of Smith's actions for GM, we never get a chance ourselves to experience any of his venality. In Sayles' film, however, it is as though the evil acts are perpetrated directly against us.

Film is a visceral medium. It is not just that we see images and hear sound. We also experience the world of the film as though we were there. That is why a documentary such as Moore's, which leads us by the nose every bit as much as a feature film, builds limitations into its structure. By making himself the homey, *Prairie Home Companion* narrator, Moore invites us along with him. Within the world he "creates," we too have a role different from our role in *Matewan*. In *Roger and Me*, we feel free to comment to ourselves and to offer our own interpretations of what we see. We share Moore's perspective on some things and not on others. But it is Moore himself who builds into the structure of his film the role of viewer as instant critic. As in life observed not on the screen, we operate with independent views. For some, Moore's film is a leap into Moore's world and not a work of "art." To others, the opposite is true because Moore manages to fuse art with the real.

Whatever a person's final opinion of these two very different films, at least one important point emerges. We seem to prefer to have film draw us away from our lives. We like to enter a fictionalized world where we can suspend judgment. In living the lives of reasonably thoughtful persons, we often cannot take absolutist positions. But we may want to do so once in a while. Films such as *Matewan*, films that use artistic skill but still paint good and bad in stark terms, give us an outlet for easy judgments we don't get to make most of the time. *Roger and Me*, on the other hand, is more troublesome precisely because it is closer to the real perplexity of life. We recognize particular types in it, and we react somewhat as if we were up there on the screen, too. Our discomfort with uncertainty works in tension with our more direct identification, even as the filmmaker manipulates us.

If someone forces us to judge — as we have to do constantly in real life — and if we've paid \$6.50 for the privilege, we tend to object. Even the admirably complex example of fictionalized truth in *Matewan*, still limits our responsibility to make judgments. *Roger and Me* manipulates those limits, too. Yet in a documentary film, we can not lose a nagging undercurrent that reminds us of the boundaries of what is real.

As a documentary filmmaker, I am pleased to be a part of a tradition that shakes normal boundary-making. Within my trade there are unwritten rules most of us feel obliged to follow (e.g., let the characters speak for themselves; do your best not to put words in their mouths in the editing process). Moore's editorial voice pushes some rules to the extreme. His stance is not one I could comfortably adopt. Ironically, however, breaking the rules is another rule of the game in the world of documentary film. The essence is to know and follow the customary rules well, but also to realize if, when, and how it is appropriate to break them.

NOTES

1. "What are Historical Facts," reprinted in P. L. Snyder, ed., *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker* 41, 50 (1958). On the objectivity question in history in general, see P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (1988).
2. T. O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 40 (pap.ed. 1991).
3. *Milkovich v. Lorain Journal Co.*, 110 S. Ct. 2695, 2706 (1990) (expression of opinion in newspaper column may be libelous). Cf. *Masson v. The New York Magazine*, 686 F. Supp. 1396 (N. D. Cal. 1987), aff'd., 895 F.2d 1535 (9th Cir. 1989, cert. granted, 111 S.Ct. 39 (1990) (no defamation for altered quotations of public figures if rational interpretations of ambiguous remarks do not later the substantive content of unambiguous remarks).
4. John Sayles, *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie Matewan* 10 (1987)
5. *Id.* at 20.